ALERT

News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

June 1993

AIDS Ministry at The Sunshine Cathedral MCC

At the Sunshine Cathedral MCC in Fort Lauderdale, FL, staff and members have been involved with AIDS Ministry for years, before any formal AIDS Ministry program was started. Gus Kein, the Associate Pastor of Sunshine Cathedral, says there have been support groups for persons with AIDS "as early as '84 or '85." Fort Lauderdale was one of the first MCC's to invite the Field Director of AIDS Ministry, Rev. Steve Pieters, to preach, the first weekend of January, 1988. Pieters recalls a full congregation of concerned Christians; this church and community had already been hit hard by HIV, at a time when many MCC's were just beginning to feel the impact.

Gus Kein estimates that 50% of the male population of the Sunshine Cathedral is HIV-positive. He reports that the Cathedral staff have been doing 75-100 memorial services a year, but mostly for people outside the church.

The Cathedral's AIDS Ministry is called "Samaritan Ministry," and they provide services to persons with any kind of life-threatening illness. The Samaritan Ministry provides training and support for volunteers who want to be part of their "care teams." Care teams, comprised of five or six people, are trained in a fourteen-week course, taught by specialists from the community. In addition to providing home care for persons who are chronically ill, Samaritan Ministry teams put on monthly potlucks and socials. They also provide a referral network with a complete resource manual, developed by Education Coordinator Steve Hansen.

Mr. Gus Kein, associate pastor

Samaritan Ministry is part of a network of ministry teams which work closely together. For example, a Telecare Minister (who regularly calls large groups of people to "check up" on them and make sure no one slips through the system) may identify a member who is home because of illness. The Telecare Minister calls a Visitation Team, who will visit the home-bound person and notify Samaritan Ministry. The Visitation Team takes care of pastoral and spiritual needs, while the Samaritan Ministry will arrange for long-term care, housecleaning, transportation, and meals.

The person in need is then referred to Gus Kein, who decides if there is any professional work needed, such as counseling. He then refers any counseling to Deacon Karen Tvarock, the Outreach Coordinator of the Sunshine Outreach Center. She has a Masters degree in counseling, and Gus reports "she also is good at sorting out a person's social service needs."

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MCC Members Fully Alive at The March on Washington

Members of MCC's from all around the U.S., as well as several from Canada and England, descended on Washington, D.C. the weekend of April 25 to join the hundreds of thousands of people marching for gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights. Many of these MCC members are living with HIV/AIDS, and were full participants in the weekend's activities, from "The Wedding," to the "Hands Around the Capitol" demonstration, to the March itself. A number of MCC members brought quilts to be added to the Names Project Quilt. The March brought out the best in MCCer's from all over the country as we contended with the hot sun and the long delays the day of the March.

On Saturday, Rev. Steve Pieters joined thousands of others at the "Hands Around the Capitol" demonstration, organized by ACT UP. After some preliminary speeches, the demonstrators completely surrounded the Capitol building several

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Minn. State Senator Alan Spear receiving plaque from Rev. Steve Pieters and Rev. Elder Troy Perry.

Sunshine Cathedral

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The Sunshine Center is a separate facility, managed by the Cathedral, but about 20 minutes away in the middle of "a very gay neighborhood." The Center provides multiple services to youth and to senior citizens, and is located in a strip of stores which are mostly gay and HIV/AIDS services. Gus says, "The Sunshine Center is primarily about counseling by day, and support groups at night."

Support groups have long been a mainstay of the Cathedral's AIDS Ministry. The Samaritan Ministry runs support groups for persons living with HIV/AIDS, for their caregivers, and for persons with HIV/AIDS and their spouses. Samaritan Ministry's support groups are coordinated by Deacon Jerry Mitchell. Gus states that the philosophy behind their support groups is "to get into support groups, and then move on. It is better to deal with illness as just one aspect of their lives. That is why we graduate them into regular small groups, like a Bible Study group, to integrate them back into the wider life of the church."

Bereavement Ministry is led by Deacon Michael Camp, who is a trained bereavement counselor and a nurse. This deacon has also done bereavement workshops for caregivers, since multiple losses can be a continuing problem for those ministering to persons with life-threatening illnesses.

Although there is no full-time person in charge of Samaritan Ministry, Gus Kein says "we'd like to see that soon." Funding for the ministry's expenses and supplies comes from a concert series given by the church's music ministry. Although they've applied for grants to fund their health crisis ministry, they have not yet received one. However, the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services gave the Sunshine Cathedral two $5,000 grants for a safe sex education campaign, passing out condoms in the bars, and creating more safe sex awareness.

The pastor, Rev. Grant Lynn Ford, participates in health awareness campaigns by sending out periodic "health advisory letters." He recently sent out a letter to the women of the church on self-examination for breast cancer. A similar letter will be going out to the men regarding prostate cancer. Rev. Ford is also the Vice-Chair of the Broward County HIV Council, which determines the expenditure of Ryan White funds, and he chairs the World AIDS Day Vigil Committee this year.

The Sunshine Center

HIV/AIDS and other health issues are raised in worship at the Sunshine Cathedral through liturgical prayers, AIDS Vigils, and an annual All-Souls Memorial Service. There is a memorial wall in the chapel, with plaques where all members' names go after they have died. There is also a "Tree of Life," which has brass leaves that people can purchase to memorialize their loved ones. The Sunshine Cathedral is always present at interfaith AIDS events, such as the World AIDS Day Service.

When asked about the church's theological basis for their AIDS Ministry, Gus replied, "The purpose is to witness the love of Christ to all people, to show a way to lead meaningful, loving lives that transcend personal, selfish living. When we teach what Christ's love can do, people are transformed, and then they become transformers. We don't preach to people, we witness by being present, and touching, and loving."

Gus Kein proudly states, "We provide so many different services at the Sunshine Cathedral and Sunshine Center, that social service agencies sometimes call us!" As he described the multiple levels of service available, it became apparent that no person with a life-threatening condition would slip through the cracks of this MCC Cathedral! ▼

Special Request: We Need A Computer!

The UFMCC AIDS Ministry needs an IBM-compatible computer with the following minimum specifications:

386 or 486;
4 MGB RAM, 100 mgb or more hard-drive;
VGA or Super VGA monitor;
Windows software.

Also a laser printer is needed.

If you can help, please contact Rev. Elder Don Eastman at (213) 464-5100, or write to UFMCC AIDS Ministry, 5300 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 304, Los Angeles, CA 90029. ▼

Author Seeks Written Documents for Book

Mary R. Sanders, the mother of a man who died from AIDS, is seeking submissions of poetry, letters, prose, etc. written to or for those who have died from AIDS (or who are HIV+) for a book to be published called, "I Never Said Goodbye to Nat."

Please send submissions to:

Mary R. Sanders
The Nat Foundation
P.O. Box 308
Briarcliff, NY 10510

The Nat Foundation is a non-profit organization which will administer any profits from the book towards helping AIDS organizations in the fight against AIDS. They hope the book will be a beacon of comfort to the many people who have lost someone to AIDS, and that it will help put an end to AIDS discrimination and bigotry. ▼

Lessons From Hamburg, Germany

By Rev. Steve Pieters

I learned a couple of important lessons from my visit to Hamburg, Germany for the European North Sea District Conference. These lessons are similar to experiences I have had repeatedly around the Fellowship, but they became particularly focused during my visit to Hamburg.

MCC Hamburg hosted the European North Sea District Conference, and the members of the church obviously worked very hard at making this first UFMCC conference held in a non-English-speaking country the great success that is was. They deserve, along with the District Conference Planning Committee, all the credit in the world for bringing together people from many different countries, cultures and languages, and creating an exiciting and worshipful experience for the members of the European North Sea District and other guests.

Unfortunately, neither the members of MCC Hamburg nor the Conference Planning Committee were responsible for the food service at the conference, and a number of the persons with HIV/AIDS, including myself, were concerned about how difficult it was to get the kind of foods and beverages which can help to sustain our lives with HIV.

The conference was held at a beautiful retreat center overlooking the Elbe River. As beautiful as the setting was, the retreat center offered very minimal food service. Some of the German members of MCC were as dissatisfied with the meals as any of us. The nearest restaurant was miles away. Aside from the repetitiveness of the meals, persons with HIV/AIDS complained that they missed fresh fruits and vegetables, and proteins such as chicken or fish. The food was mostly unappetizing, even for people with a good appetite. When someone was discovered with oranges, or take-out barbecue, word quickly spread through an "underground" network of people with HIV/AIDS at the conference.

But the complaint I heard most often from persons with HIV/AIDS was about dehydration. The only beverages available at meals were coffee and tea. For some persons with HIV/AIDS, coffee and tea are too difficult for the body to process because of the caffeine. Futhermore, it was difficult to take medication with hot beverages. At the final meal of the conference, one particularly assertive woman with HIV pushed her way into the kitchen and managed to get a pitcher of tap water for one table. There was an "honor bar" downstairs where people could purchase sodas, sparkling water, or beer, but at least a couple of the persons with HIV/AIDS had little money to spend at the honor bar, and between meals there was little else available.

Persons with HIV/AIDS at the conference urged me to write about this for ALERT. They recognized that neither MCC Hamburg, nor the District Conference Planning Committee, were responsible for the retreat center's food service. But there is a need for people who are negotiating food services for future conferences (throughout the Fellowship) to pay attention that there are members of MCC with life-threatening conditions who have the need for continuing good nutrition, a supply of water or juice, and for whom caffeine - or suger-filled beverages are not easily tolerated.

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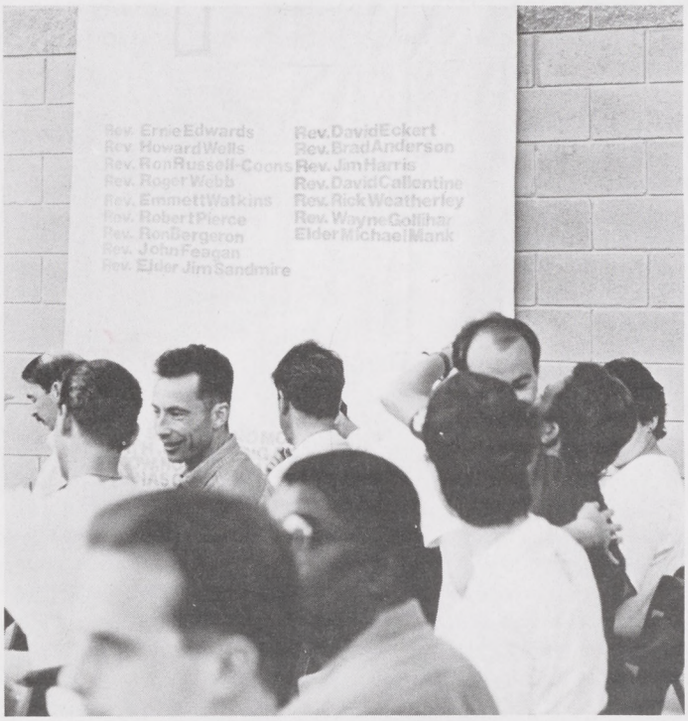

Banner listing UFMCC Clergy who have died from complications of AIDS. Banner made by Tony Shull of Santa Ana, CA.

March on Washington

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times, holding hands to form a human chain. Everyone turned their backs on the Capitol to protest the way that the U.S. government has seemingly turned their backs on people living with HIV/AIDS. It was a powerful moment of solidarity, as many persons with HIV/AIDS joined people who work on the front lines of the pandemic, all linked together in a single visual statement to the U.S. government.

Saturday evening, MCC Washington, DC hosted a Congressional reception. Attended by 150 people, the event was a benefit for MCC Washington and the UFMCC AIDS Ministry. Rev. Elder Troy Perry and Rev. Steve Pieters presented plaques to Senator Alan Spear, President of the Minnesota State Senate, and Roberta Achtenberg, Assistant Secretary for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, the highest ranking openly lesbian or gay person in the U.S. government. A representative of California Senator Diane Feinstein, Ralph Payne, also attended the reception, and explained that Senator Feinstein was in California at hearings involving the closing of military bases there.

Much of the leadership from around the Fellowship took the opportunity to tour the magnificent new building MCC Washington has just built and dedicated. A gorgeous banner listing most of the UFMCC clergy who have died from the complications of AIDS was hanging in the sanctuary, and drew many compliments as well as tears.

Sunday was "the big day," beginning with the Communion Service at the Lincoln Memorial. Rev. Elder Troy Perry testified to the power of prayer when he introduced his lover,

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Hamburg, Germany

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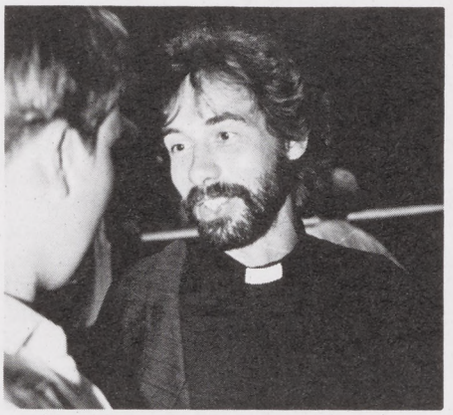
There was a great sensitivity to persons with HIV/AIDS among the members of MCC Hamburg. For example, church members led a guided tour of Hamburg for District Conference attendees, and I was struck by how the English translator periodically checked up on me and the others with HIV, as we walked all over the city. Several persons with HIV/AIDS decided the walking was becoming too difficult, and members of MCC Hamburg whisked them onto the subway and took them to the church early.

When I preached at MCC Hamburg, I was very moved by the congregation's stong, beautiful singing of the stately German hymns, and the obvious faithfulness and steady spirituality exhibited by the members of the church. People were extremely gracious in thanking me for my message of hope, and for the opportunity to grieve together in church. I noted in my journal that right after my sermon, "many of the men, some of whom had identified themselves to me as HIV-positive, were openly crying...they applauded long and loud, stomping on the floor. After the service, many, many people told me in whatever English they could muster, what an important gift my sermon was to them, and how grateful they were."

And yet, one young man, speaking through his pastor, Rev. Thomas Friedhoff, as an interpreter, shared with me his fear of being known as HIV-positive within this loving and concerned congregation. He had had a couple of bad experiences in sharing his HIV status with individual "friends" when he first learned he was positive a year previously. So this young man is terrified that the church will not embrace him if he becomes ill, and that he will have to face AIDS alone. Rev. Friedhoff and I both gave him reassurances, but it struck me how much fear exists in spite of the demonstrated care and concern of the members of MCC Hamburg for those of us with HIV. It reminded me of how we need to constantly be aware of providing and communicating an environment and a feeling of safety and security for persons who may not feel safe in public places.



Rev. Thomas Friedhoff

What is the answer to this problem? Many congregations have benefited from one member "coming out" as having HIV infection. When others who are HIV-positive see the pastor and other church leaders responding with love and support for this one individual, they are more likely to come out themselves. It sometimes takes one "role model" for persons with HIV/AIDS and another "role model" for the appropriate congregational response.

MCC Hamburg worked very hard at putting on one of the most terrific District Conferences I've ever been to in UFMCC. They were extremely gracious and hospitable to all of us. But we all learned how important the food service can be at any conference, if we are committed to creating a hospitable environment for people with life-threatening conditions.

And even though there is no formalized AIDS Ministry at MCC Hamburg, there is a sensitive awareness among the members of the continuing impact of HIV/AIDS. And yet, there are still members living with HIV/AIDS who are scared to death of their church family knowing the truth of their status, just as there are in many MCC's around the world.

Whatever the solution, we must continue to be vigilant in creating a safe place for persons with life-threatening conditions to receive the support and love of the church, which will increase the quality of life at a time when that quality is certainly at stake. And we must learn to be sensitive to, and accommodate the nutritional needs of persons who need the best fuel available to fight for their lives! ▼

ALERT

ALERT is a monthly newsletter containing information on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment. The Editor is Rev. Dr. A. Stephen Pieters. For more information, or to send a donation, please write or call: ALERT, c/o UFMCC, 5300 Santa Monica Blvd., #304, Los Angeles, CA 90029; phone: (213) 464-5100.

March on Washington

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Philip DeBlieck, who has been HIV-positive and asymptomatic for a number of years. Rev. Herbert Evans, newly installed pastor of MCC Philadelphia, offered a tremendously moving prayer in which he identified himself as a person living with HIV. Many people at the service privately recalled those of our members who were alive with us at the last Communion Service at the Lincoln Memorial before the March in 1987, but who have since died from the complications of AIDS.

As exiciting as the March itself was, many people, whether they were living with HIV/AIDS or not, were challenged by the strain of waiting in the hot sun to step off on the March. It was moving to see the way MCC members reached out and served those who were having trouble. Some went running for water or sodas, others shared their sun screen, and still others escorted people to shady areas or to the First Aid station.

A perfect ending for the day was the evening worship service at MCC Washington. The combined choirs thrilled the congregation with a variety of music, each selection more exciting than the last. Rev. Larry Uhrig, the pastor of MCC Washington, preached an incredibly dynamic and challenging sermon. In one of his most memorable moments, he spoke about visualizing our T-cells not as killer cells or helper cells, but as prophetic cells, calling our bodies to health, wholeness, and righteousness!

The members of MCC Washington are to be commended for the generous hospitality they showed all the visitors from around the U.S. But the weekend belonged to each one of us who were there. For people with HIV/AIDS, it was an exhilarating, if challenging, event that helped us all feel fully alive and a part of a great community! ▼